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KT photo | **Tim Bath**

House of Burgess: Parties target Sanders, Trump

RNC, DNC chairs scrambling to halt upstarts

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

While the final Republican and Democratic debates of 2015 played out last week, party leaders worked to usurp their respective top upstarts.

As I wrote in last week's column, "GOP preparing for convention rumble," The Washington Post reported a secret meeting with GOP leaders looking for a floor fight to prevent Donald Trump from becoming the nominee. And as I wrote in my Sept. 14 column, "Democrats stifle their own debates," former Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley called out Democratic National

Committee chairwoman and Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz for limiting debate schedules.

REPUBLICAN UNDERCARD

Dec. 15's GOP debate, hosted by CNN's Wolf Blitzer and Salem Radio, at The Venetian in Las Vegas was the party's fifth. South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham and former New York Gov. George Pataki clawed their way back to the stage. Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum has been invited to every undercard. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was allowed back in primetime, leaving former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee in the lurch. (Former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore hasn't been seen since the first debate.) Pataki ratcheted up his hawkishness. No one could match Graham, as he was practically jumping up and down for war. Huckabee maintained Trump would be better than Clinton, and Santorum co-signed Trump's anti-Muslim statements.

Losers: All.

Highlight: Graham ended his candidacy Monday. He was always quotable. "Mr. Trump, you don't have to speak about everything," he told the audience. "It's not required."

REPUBLICAN PRIMETIME

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, Christie, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, Trump, Dr. Ben Carson, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina and Ohio Gov. John Kasich were up next. Paul came out swinging against civil rights abuses. Kasich came out in favor of metadata collection and wanted to “punch Russia in the nose.” Christie wallowed happily in the fear-mongering, calling President Barack Obama a “feckless weakling.” Carson joined Cruz in calling for carpet bombing ISIS. Fresh off an endorsement by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump was called a “chaos candidate” by Bush. “You’re real tough, Jeb,” Trump said. Trump then complained about CNN’s Trump-centric questioning. He was very buddy-buddy with Cruz, saying he would consider him for running mate. Rubio was strong, but mostly faded. Fiorina complained about time. Finally, Trump reaffirmed his GOP nominee support pledge. Carson walked back his response to The Washington Post report, saying Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus told him it was wrong.

Winners: Trump, Cruz, Rubio, Paul.

Losers: Christie, Kasich, Fiorina, Bush, Carson.

Highlight: “If you’re in favor of World War III, you’ve got your candidate,” Paul said of Christie.

DEMOCRATS

Saturday's Democratic debate, hosted by WMUR and ABC News' David Muir and Martha Raddatz, at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, was only the party's third. It fell during a dust-up between independent Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' campaign and the DNC. "Two more Sanders staffers have been suspended in the wake of the revelation that the campaign had improperly accessed and downloaded voter data belonging to Clinton's campaign," reported Elisha Fieldstadt of NBC News on Sunday. "Sanders' national data director, Josh Uretsky, was fired Friday. ... The campaign also filed a lawsuit against the DNC over a 'breach of contract' after the DNC disciplined the campaign by revoking its credentials to access its own voter data. [They] reached a deal late Friday to restore access." Sanders apologized to Clinton and his supporters, calling for an independent investigation. O'Malley made an age joke and complained about time. As in a previous debate, Clinton came back late from the bathroom. The moderators ended with a strange question about changing "the role of a president's spouse."

Winners: Clinton, Sanders.

Loser: O'Malley.

Highlight: Clinton's pandering closer: "May the force be with you."

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